

THE IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL.*

BY HEREWARD CARRINGTON.

THE attitude of mind assumed by Mr. Wakeman, in his criticism of Dr. Funk's book, *The Widow's Mite*, is quite understandable, very human, and—from one point of view—thoroughly justifiable. Mr. Wakeman's attitude may be taken, I believe, as fairly representing the average scientific mind of to-day; that of Dr. Carus as a typical scientific-philosophical mind. I shall devote a few words, first, to a consideration of the remarks of each of these gentlemen, before stating my main contention—which is, namely, that the majority of the *Open Court* readers do not look at psychical research phenomena in the proper spirit—or study them from the particular point of view of the psychical researcher.

Mr. Wakeman's main contention is, of course, that the majority (not all, but the majority) of scientific men, with the great Professor Haeckel at their head, have pronounced against the possibility of personal immortality; or of the existence of any such thing as "spirit" or "soul," separable from its material encasement. I quite understand and appreciate the strength and the character of the evidence upon which Mr. Wakeman relies for his dogmatic assertions—evidence undoubtedly strong, positive, abundant, and lending a very strong impetus to the materialistic cause. It is true that there is another way of viewing these newer results of science—a method of interpreting them which tells—not in favor of materialism, but just the reverse; and it is also true that there are many weighty philosophic and metaphysical objections to the doctrine of materialism—(meaning by this any system which excludes "spirit" as a separate essence or entity)—but on these I shall not dwell here. In the first place, this is not the time or place for such a discussion; and, in the second place, I am not at all sure myself that these ob-

* A brief criticism of the articles on this subject by Thaddeus B. Wakeman and the Editor of *The Open Court* in the number for June, 1905.

jections *should* carry weight, or even enter at all, into a scientific discussion. Science deals with *facts*, and it is the *fact* of personal immortality that we must now consider from that particular scientific or critical attitude.

I can quite appreciate the repugnance Mr. Wakeman feels in discussing any such thing as "spirit"—I have experienced just such feelings myself and fully understand them. Let us, then, eliminate "spirit" from our discussion, and use the expression "persistence of personal consciousness." Having thus eliminated the objectionable term, perhaps we may arrive at a basis for discussion.

The great point is, of course, that consciousness is indubitably bound up, in some way, with brain function; and the scientific man asserts that the thought—and so consciousness—is in some manner a product of this functioning, or, at least, so inseparably bound up with it that any existence *apart* from such functioning is unthinkable and altogether unwarranted. He asserts that thought is but one aspect of the nervous system's functioning, and that when that functioning ceases, there is and can be, consequently, no more thought or consciousness. The conclusion is obvious, therefore—it is claimed—that consciousness is obliterated at death, and, as Mr. Wakeman puts it—"After the death of Mr. Beecher there was, therefore, no possible spirit, soul, or consciousness of him extant, to bother or be bothered about his 'widow's mite,' or anything else." (P. 361.)

Now my claim is this: that in such reasoning the cart has, figuratively speaking, been placed before the horse; and that a wrong course of argument has been pursued. Instead of searching, impartially, for the facts in the case, an *a priori* denial of the possibility of such facts has been made—and, of course, if a fact is impossible it cannot exist! But how do we know that it is impossible? At the most we can only raise a *presumption* against its occurrence; and a dogmatic denial of its possibility has led science into great and preposterous blunders more than once. It is only necessary to recall such cases as the experiments of Galvani; and, more recently, the questions of meteors, hypnotism, etc., to be assured of the accuracy of that statement. Of course, scientific reserve in the face of new and strange facts is always justifiable, but that is a different matter to flat *a priori* denial. But the point is that instead of searching for such facts as tend to prove man's immortality, the majority of scientists content themselves with declaring, *without* investigation, that such a condition is impossible: quite forgetting the fact that logic shows us that it is impossible to prove a negative!

The psychical researcher also realizes the strength of the scien-

tific *presumption* against a future life of any sort, but says—"nevertheless, here are certain well-evidenced facts which seem to prove such survival. If I can obtain enough and definite enough facts and evidence of this character, then the presumption will be overthrown, because we have certain facts which definitely prove it to be incorrect." In short, the only method from which any conclusive result can follow is that in which all presumption is laid aside and deliberate experiment entered upon. That is the attitude of the psychical researcher. As I wrote some years ago, *à propos* of this very point,* "Obviously, the only way to decide this question is not to speculate *a priori* upon the possibility of spirit existence, and reason from that, the possibility of its return—but to test and establish the possibility of its return, from which we can argue (should that be established) that man *has* a spirit *to* return. Here, as before, it is merely a question of evidence."

Now, of the character, the variety, and the strength of this evidence I cannot, of course, speak here. I must refer the interested reader to the eighteen printed volumes of the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research, (S. P. R.), or, if this is too much to ask, I would suggest that the reader peruse Professor Hyslop's very excellent book entitled *Science and a Future Life*. Professor Hyslop handles this question in what is to my mind an ideal manner, and I cannot too strongly recommend it to the serious attention of the readers of *The Open Court*.

To turn to the article by Dr. Carus: I am not quite sure that I fully understand his position in the matter. I take it to be (but I stand open to correction) that all *personal* or individual immortality is denied; but that the impression or imprint our life and personality have made upon the human race—or rather those of the race with whom we came into contact—constitutes the after-effects, or immortality of which Dr. Carus speaks. Of course, no one would deny *that* kind of immortality in any case, but I venture to suggest that—for the individual concerned—such an immortality practically amounts to annihilation. Immortality without individuality is no immortality at all. I cannot now go into any detailed discussion of Dr. Carus' attitude—because the length of this paper is already too great, but I can only say that it does not at all appeal to me. Either the individual exists *as such*, or he does not. If not, it is practically annihilation so far as *he* is concerned. With this I leave that branch of the discussion.

* *Metaphysical Magazine*, January-March, 1903, p. 198; article: "Psychical Research."

A few final words as to the interrelation of brain and mind; and the inferences that are drawn from the "admitted fact" of the correlation of mental states and cerebral changes. For every thought there is a corresponding change in the brain-substance—from which the conclusion is drawn that "when there is no more brain there can be no more thought or consciousness." But does that follow? Because the two facts are always coincidental, does it follow that the brain-change *produced* the thought? By no means! We might urge, on the contrary, that the brain-change was merely the *result* of such thought; or that it was merely coincidental in time, without the one affecting the other, or that both are but aspects of something else. This fact of functional dependence has been looked at from one standpoint only. As Prof. William James remarked in his *Human Immortality* "it would appear that the supposed impossibility of its (the soul's) continuing comes from too superficial a look at the admitted fact of functional dependence. The moment we inquire more closely into the notion of functional dependence, and ask ourselves, for example, how many kinds of functional dependence there may be, we immediately perceive that there is one kind at least, that does not exclude a life hereafter at all. The fatal conclusion of the physiologist flows from his assuming offhand *another* kind of functional dependence, and treating it as the only imaginary kind." But this is altogether unwarranted and unjustifiable. I have elaborated a theory of consciousness, and of its relation to brain function, in my article on "The Origin and Nature of Consciousness," (*The Metaphysical Magazine*, April-June, 1905, pp. 42-56) which accepts the *fact* of dependence, but endeavors to account for it in such a manner as would leave personality quite possible, and immortality an open question: one that could *then* be determined by direct experiment. Mr. Wakeman must not misunderstand me: I am not arguing that the soul *does* exist—but merely that it is *possible* for it to exist—and, this being the case we should endeavor to directly experiment in those directions which hold out some hope of its proof as existent. Personally I do not particularly care whether the soul lives after the death of the body or not. To me, as I have repeatedly stated, it is merely a question of evidence—of verifiable fact. But I do object to the attitude of men who assert offhand and *a priori*, that such an existence is impossible, because I do not think that such a conclusion is either justified or warranted by the results of modern science—especially in the face of evidence now accumulated by the Psychical Research Society—of which I am an unworthy member.

EDITOR'S REPLY.

Though I do not characterize my position as materialism, I feel convinced that Mr. Carrington would be obliged to call me a materialist according to his classification. According to my nomenclature, materialism* is that view which attempts to explain the world from matter and motion, and omits the most essential characteristic of existence—the significance and reality of purely formal relations. But in spite of my objection to materialism as a philosophical principle, I would not hesitate to deny the ghost existence of the soul which means that spirits could lead an independent life without being somehow incarnated into bodily actuality. I recognize the spiritual and I claim that it alone possesses significance, while the material part of the universe and even energy amount to nothing unless guided by the will of spiritual purpose. Further I wish to state that Mr. Carrington has probably understood my position correctly in appreciating the significance of man's after-life, the reality of which as he says no one would deny. But he does not grasp the implications of this view which might as well be stated in a negative form declaring that the individual as a separate entity, a kind of thing-in-itself after the Vedantist *atman* does not exist at all so it could not survive. The first question to be solved is not whether or not the personality of man will live again, but what is the personality of man, how does it originate, and whence does it come; and the solution of this will naturally answer the other question, Whither does it fare? I believe I have treated the subject with sufficient plainness in my little book *Whence and Whither*.

The negative aspect which denies that personality is a thing-in-itself is misleading in so far as it seems to deny the reality of personality. If our soul is not a thing-in-itself it is still a fact of real life, and though that congregation of ideas, impulses, sentiments, and purposes which constitutes myself at the present moment will be broken up in death it will nevertheless continue to constitute a factor in the world of living and aspiring mankind, and it will continue to be accompanied by the consciousness of living generations just as much as my ideas are conscious in my own body. We shall be preserved entire and nothing will be lost in death of the essential features of our personality.

This view may be unsatisfactory to many people and may ap-

* For details of my criticism as to the errors of the materialism of Carl Voigt, see *Fundamental Problems*, pp. 350-354.

pear tantamount to extinction from the standpoint of those who are under the illusion that their personality is in the present existence a thing-in-itself, and I would not deny that it is so; but I claim that kind nature has with seeming intention clothed the truth in the language of myth and has made mankind create different allegories as to the nature of immortality, making it more or less materialistic and sensuous. All the several religions present the truth of immortality in an artistic form which is only untrue if its symbolism is understood literally.

In Mr. Carrington's conception my views would probably appear identical with those of Mr. Wakeman, for like him I do not believe that spirits of the departed can be consulted or communicated with in the style of mediumistic séances, but I object to Mr. Wakeman's position in so far as I must emphatically declare that man's life is not finished at his death. That the after-life constituted by the effects of life itself is a salient part of the present life and has to be constantly considered in all our actions. A consideration of the status of our being after we are gone should be the supreme motive of all our principles, and I would not hesitate to say that it constitutes the basis of all true morality.

I have followed with great interest the work of the Society of Psychical Research, but I must confess that I do not deem its results as assured as do many of its enthusiastic members. So far as I can see they are of a negative nature and disproportionately small to the enormous output of labor and expense.